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ABSTRACT

The first identity new graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) must adopt is the "instructor" persona, which must be carried out with confidence and competence if their freshmen students are to accept them as qualified instructors. For those GTAs who are uncomfortable with this persona, the faculty supervisor can provide them with a detailed teaching plan for the first few classes. Also, an early visit by the supervisor to the GTA's classroom tends to rally the students around the GTA, thus improving self-confidence. The second role is the "human" persona, which must show sympathy, patience, and understanding for students as well as provide practical advice during the writing experience. To ensure this, GTAs might be required to perform the same writing assignments they will give their students, so that they will personally experience many of the obstacles that their students will encounter. A classroom visit while students are writing first drafts will allow the faculty supervisor to observe the GTA's answers to student questions. The third identity GTAs must assume is the "departmental" persona, in which they enforce departmental policy and course regulations. To help GTAs with the moral dilemma of grading, supervisors should mark the first few assignments without assigning grades. When grades are finally assigned, the GTAs should be required to write an end comment that explains the grade, which obligates them to clarify the grading criteria for themselves as well as their students. (HTH)

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Training GTA's To Teach: Persona, Personality, and Policy

William Connelly

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Training GTA'S To Teach: Persona, Personality, and Policy

How many corporations would survive if they were forced each year to replace one-half of their personnel? How would football dynasties such as those presided over by Bear Bryant and Tom Landry fare if each year over one-half of the starting line-up were rookies? Clearly, both questions are rhetorical. Even the most profitable of businesses could endure long under the constant need to replace and train a large portion of its employees. Aren't teams on which several rookies see action referred to as being in "a building program"? And yet these are precisely the conditions faced yearly by English departments who employ graduate teaching assistants. Each fall large numbers of new GTA's are thrown into the classroom to teach composition, many without even the limited experience of student teaching.

Although their qualifications and backgrounds vary, almost all GTA's are English majors, which means that they bring unique talents to their work: they are usually the best and the brightest, the most creative, the most humanistic of students. They majored in English because language cast its spell over them. In becoming GTA's they hope to share their love of language and its possibilities with their students. (Pause) And then they are assigned to teach elementary writing skills to basic writers. The result initially is a confusion that often gives way to bewilderment for some, to a dark night of the soul for others. Whatever the reaction is, it is a painful rite of passage for all new GTA's who must quickly learn to master three identities

or personae, if they hope to survive and to succeed as writing teachers.

The first identity new GTA's must adopt is the "instructor" persona, a role that must be carried out with confidence and competence if students are to accept the new GTA's as qualified instructors. The second role is the "human" persona that must show sympathy, patience, and understanding for the students as the GTA's work with them to overcome their frustration and uncertainty as writers. This persona must be in evidence and in action while students write drafts of their papers. The third role is the "departmental" persona, one that must be the agent of departmental policy, enforcing course rules, requirements, and standards for evaluating written work. Particularly troublesome for new GTA's is the application of grading standards to their students' papers. They must become judge and jury, which they are understandably reluctant to do. Yet just as surely as the second persona evolves from the first, so does the third from the second; and finally, the third yields the first.

New GTA's quickly perceive the paradox and the discomfort of adopting and balancing all three roles in their teaching. Yet when one of these roles gets out of balance, is overplayed or underplayed, problems occur that require immediate attention. By examining each persona, we can identify some of the typical problems that arise and suggest, however tentative, some responses to the difficulties.

The first identity, the "instructor" persona, must be "put on" at once since new GTA's wear it into the first class period.

However, as the following situation indicates, some new GTA's have to journey a great distance to become the "instructor." Each year, early in the summer I receive a few notes that typically read something like this: "As you probably know, I have been selected to serve as a graduate teaching assistant in the English Department next fall. However, I have never taught before and I would appreciate some advice from you about how to teach composition. Also, will you please send me the necessary textbooks so that I might prepare myself to teach my courses. Sincerely yours, ect., etc." Such notes are telling for several reasons. For persons such as the writer of this note becoming a GTA is not only their first encounter with teaching composition, but with teaching; and they would like to know--in a word or two from me--how to do so. No amount of advice from me, however, can prepare these individuals to enter the classroom on the first day with the confidence needed to face twenty-five students and to answer their questions without fear and tremor.

So what's to be done? For those GTA's who are uncomfortable with the instructor persona, there are a couple of useful forms of assistance. The first is to meet with them once or twice before classes begin. At this time they can be given a detailed teaching plan for the first two or three weeks of the semester. (I mean detailed! I mean instructions that list step by step and minute by minute what they will do and say in the first few class periods.) In later meetings throughout the semester, the

instructions become less specific and more flexible as the GTA's develop the confidence and competence to take matters into their own hands.

Another method, admittedly a more dramatic one, is to visit very early in the semester classes taught by GTA's who are having some trouble maintaining composure and confidence in front of their classes. My presence in the classroom suddenly shifts the critical audience from the students to me. In this context the students become the allies, part of the same team. Also, my experience has been that students are quick to sense the presence of the "outsider"--of a Grendel in their midst--and to rally around the instructor by asking questions, offering comments, and demonstrating their respect and support for their instructor. After such visits, most GTA's perceive that teaching a class of freshmen is infinitely less threatening than speaking in front of one all-knowing presence. After written evaluations of the classroom visits and personal conferences with these GTA's, the result is almost always the same: a sudden surge of self-confidence and a growth in their professional identity.

Another type has trouble handling the "instructor" persona because they overplay it. Instead of asking for assistance or for texts in advance, they just show up at the first group meeting usually in their blue jeans and displaying a "sprezzatura" that Castiglione would envy. They are good students, and they know it; they are good writers, and they know it. For them, there

can't be anything too mysterious about teaching writing to a few freshmen. The potential problem here, of course, is a form of arrogance that may in the classroom become somewhat steely and rigid. Unlike the first type, who are only too willing to confess publically to what they don't know, this type is afraid to say, "I don't know," in front of students or in front of their peers at group meetings of the GTA's.

Although fewer in number, they can be more difficult to deal with. Again, early visits to their classes will reveal whether they are in fact "up tight" in the "instructor" persona. And if so, a couple of personal conferences usually persuades these GTA's to relax in front of their students, to talk <u>with</u> their students instead of <u>at</u> them, and to admit, when necessary, that they are learning about the art of teaching writing while their students are learning the craft of writing.

of the three roles, the second, the "human" persona, is the most crucial to the effectiveness of the new GTA's as writing teachers. In this role the GTA's must display patience, understanding, and a willingness to help students with their writing. Thankfully, it is not a difficult role for most new GTA's to play. Because most want to be teachers, new GTA's make service to their students their first priority. As serious students of literature, most are altruistic and romantic; thus compassion becomes them. However, it is one thing to empathize with students about their writing, another to be able to help them through the experience with practical advice. One alternative is

to require that all new GTA's perform in advance the same writing assignments they give their students. In doing so, the GTA's personally experience many of the obstacles that their students will encounter. In follow-up group meetings, solutions to potential problems in the assignment can be suggested. In this way, the GTA's go into their classes prepared to unravel and untangle the knots that their students will bring them.

Another avenue open to those who supervise GTA's is to visit the classes of new GTA's when their students are writing drafts, especially rough drafts. Such visits allow the observer to listen to the answers to questions asked by students about their papers. (Believe me, such visits are far more enlightening about what the GTA's really know about writing than are visits to a lecture or discussion class.) Taking careful notes and conferring afterwards with each GTA enables the supervisor to evaluate the soundness or correctness of the GTA's advice. I am convinced that in this one-on-one work with students writing drafts the GTA's really learn to teach writing competently. In these classes, they must become mechanics and surgeons, helping students to fine tune and to cleanly suture their compositions. Essentially, this method applies in the traditional classroom the tutorial method used in many writing centers.

There are pitfalls to be avoided. The GTA's must be encouraged not to leave the classroom for coffee or conversation with their friends. They should be dissuaded from bringing to class a book to read or papers to grade. If the instructor

looks busy, students are reluctant to ask questions. Instead, the GTA's should walk slowly around the classroom, allowing students to ask questions. If none are forthcoming, the instructor can ask, "How's it going? Have you worked out your thesis statement yet"? Such a gesture usually breaks the ice and invites informal conferences the rest of the period.

Ironically, however, the very rapport that the GTA's establish with their students in writing classes creates a reluctance among them to enforce what appears to be severe and inflexible grading standards that many departments use as guidelines. Having so openly worn the "human" persona, they are uncomfortable facing the task of evaluating their students' work. If the adoption of the "instructor" persona is a nerve-wracking public act, the role of the "departmental" persona, especially that of the "grader," is an even more agonizing private one for new GTA's. And there are no easy solutions.

One tactic that gains time is that advocated by William Irmscher in Teaching Expository Writing: mark but don't assign grades to the first two or three sets of papers.[1] Another is to use one of the two Delayed Grading Systems outlined by Beth Neman is Teaching Students to Write.[2] Such methods give the new GTA's valuable time not only to learn how to mark papers but also to thrash out in group meetings the moral dilemma of grading. I have not found individual conferences very beneficial in solving this crisis. It is a case for lively peer discussion among the GTA's, with minimal involvement from the faculty supervisor. Only peer pressure can and will carry the day in this

debate. Each time I witness this crisis I think that this is what the scene must be like when a jury cloisters itself after a trial to decide a verdict. The arguments have been stated and the evidence presented. Now the individual jury members must decide their respective validities. (In the case of the GTA's it is a irony of ironies, for they must pass sentences on sentences.) Inevitably, the new GTA's, like the jury, resign themselves to their profesisonal responsibilities and consent to assign grades. But to their credit, they never do so without a fight and without a sense that their idealism and their humanistic values have been compromised.

A couple of other pratical suggestions are in order. First, the GTA's should be required to mark and to make comments on the early ungraded sets. Then each of these sets should be returned to students for rewriting in class. This procedure permits the GTA's to slip quite involuntarily back into the "human" persona as they discuss the papers with individuals students as "tutors" rather than as "graders." Second, when grades are finally assigned, the GTA's should be required to write an end comment on each paper that explains to the student the grade that was assigned. This requirement obligates the GTA's to clarify their grading criteria for themselves as well as their students; that is, it forces them to rhetorically and philosophically engage the department's writing standards and to apply them fairly and separately to each student's paper. Also, when the papers are returned for rewriting in class, the comments serve as a basis for further discussion between the GTA's and their students,

enabling the GTA's to easily become "the tutor" rather than "the judge" as they help the students rewrite and correct their papers.

Since the grading process is the most difficult skill for new GTA's to master, the voices they listen to for advice should not be limited to their inexperienced peers or to a single faculty supervisor. They must finally be convinced that grading can be a positive learning experience for both the instructor and the students. To this end, new GTA's should be assigned to read and to submit summaries of articles on grading and evaluating papers from such journals as Basic Writing, College Composition and Communication, and College English. In addition, the chapters by Irmscher on "Evaluation" and especially that by Neman on "Grading and Evaluation" are invaluable. In grading, Irmscher advocates a "psychology of reinforcement," which he says "should be the major resource of every writing teacher."[3] With a similar motive Neman concedes that:

> If our students are to learn to write . . . negative criticism cannot be totally ignored; but we can deliver it in ways designed to minimize its destructive effect on our students' self-image. It is of primary importance that criticism by perceived not as evidence of the writer's innate capacity . . . but rather as recommendation for improvement.[5]

Such human and reasonable voices as Irmscher's and Neman's can help to persuade new GTA's that their students' psychological well-being and their own as "graders" may escape the more dire

consequences of grades.

If I have made it sound as if teaching composition is a complex and troublesome task for new GTA's, it is because I believe that it is. But recall that I began by listing and praising their many virtues and talents. In spite of the roles that new GTA's have to play and the professional battles they have to fight, most of them emerge triumphant each year. Like Gawain in his encounter with the Green Knight, they are tested, surprised, and humbled--but they endure and are wiser for the experience. They many not be able to look forward to a return to Camelot as their reward. But they have learned that the imaginative and compassionate instructor can make a Camelot of his classroom. Those of us who have served as their Virgils and Merlins can let the GTA's renew their individual quests the next year without us because they know the Grail is to be found in the classroom, within themselves and their interactions with their students.

Notes

[1] William F. Irmscher, Teaching Expository Writing (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), p. 153.

[2] Beth Neman, Teaching Students to Write (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1980), pp. 411-12.

[3] Irmscher, p. 150

[4] Neman, p. 393

[5] Neman, p. 395